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Laos Intervention Error, Envoy Says

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By WALTER W. MEEK

THE United States must work to strengthen the small neutralist party in divided Laos and avoid forceful intervention if unity and peace are ever to be achieved, a visiting British diplomat said here yesterday.

Only the neutrals headed by Premier Prince Souvanna Phouma can bring about integration of the country's three warring factions, said Merwyn Brown, former first secretary and deputy head of mission at the British embassy in Vientiane, the Laotian capital.

Brown, en route to England for home leave and duty in the British Foreign Office, was interviewed at the Scottsdale home of Mr. and Mrs. Halbert Hoard where he was a house guest.

He stopped in Phoenix to speak last night to the local branch of the English Speaking Union at Phoenix Country Club.

Brown, who served three years in Laos, was well acquainted with the Laotian leaders, and spent a month last year as a captive of the pro-Communist Pathet Lao troops.

He said the Pathet Lao, led by Deputy Premier Prince Souphanouvong, and the right-wing faction headed by Deputy Premier Gen. Phoumi Nosavan are so bitterly opposed that they

could never work their differences out.

But both of the powerful extreme groups appear willing, Brown said, to work with the numerically inferior neutrals under Souvanna's banner of nationalism.

He said the neutral prince is anti-Communist and basically pro-Western in his thinking, but remains angered at being a former target for removal by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency under Allen Dulles.

Any force or direct military intervention by the West into the country's problems might alienate Souvanna, Brown said, and would add valuable grist to the Communist propaganda mill.

"The coalition, as rickety as it is, remains our only hope," Brown said. "Through it, the neutrals could eventually bring real stability."

"The situation is a mess,"

Brown observed, "and it will take years, with possible crises flaring up at any time. But the best policy is to keep Laos calm and work toward long-run integration."

THE COALITION can survive, Brown asserted, with proper backing for Souvanna, and with tightly controlled foreign economic aid aimed at making the country more self-sufficient.

Referring to economics, Brown said Laos still imports 10 times what it exports. In addition, he said, the government's annual deficit is 90 per cent of what it spends.

Nearly all of the deficit, he said, comes from supporting the country's out-size military forces, especially the 60,000-man light wing army.

With no direct American military aid now in effect, Brown said, the government pays these forces just by printing more money. Thus, the currency has been devalued by nearly 75 per cent in the last year.

THE PRESENT difficulties, Brown said, are mainly internal, between the Pathet Laos and the neutrals. He said the Communists have to take the blame, and have suffered a severe propaganda loss because of it.

"It embarrasses the Communists to be caught at it," Brown said.

He added, "Through this latest crisis, the neutrals have re-

united their identity, and at the same time have learned that the Pathet Lao are their enemies, not their allies."

The British diplomat said the Russian embassy in Laos has cooperated closely with the English in trying to keep the peace. The two nations were co-chairmen of the Geneva Conference which brought about the coalition and three-way partition of the country.

"A few years ago," he said, "Russia's cooperation would have been enough to guarantee the peace, but not now, with their split with Communist China in the background."

BROWN is fond of the people and the country, even though he spent a month as a Pathet Lao prisoner after trying to obtain the release of two captured British doctors.

"Conditions were hard," he said, "but we weren't mistreated." He was hauled about the country by a military headquarters group until Prince Souphanouvong obtained his release.